

Lankans vote in tense post-war election

Fonseka says unable to cast vote

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankans voted in their first post-war presidential election yesterday amid claims of violence and voter intimidation after a bitter and highly personal campaign.

The contest was a straight fight between the incumbent, Mahinda Rajapakse, and his former army chief Sarath Fonseka, and was seen as too close to call by political observers.

Fonseka said he was unable to vote in the election because his name was not on the electoral register.

Allies in the defeat of the Tamil Tiger rebels in May, the two men had a very acrimonious falling out after the conflict ended and both ran campaigns that sought to take personal credit for the military victory.

Polls closed at 4:00 pm (1030 GMT) with election monitors reporting a turnout of up to 80 percent in the south of the island, but a far weaker showing in the Tamil-dominated north, where voters were rattled by a series of pre-dawn bomb blasts.

Both sides predicted victory when results are announced Wednesday and blamed each other for the poll-related violence in

several areas that prompted a negative verdict from observers.

"We can't say it was a free and fair election because there were a number of incidents all over the country," said DM Dissanayake, national coordinator of the Independent Centre for Monitoring Election Violence.

Another group, the Campaign for Free and Fair Elections, also raised doubts, citing voter intimidation and administrative obstacles that prevented voters in northern areas from casting their ballots.

The vitriolic nature of the campaign, coupled with the personal animosity between the two main candidates and the reported poll irregularities, are likely to fuel concerns that the loser might reject the result, triggering fresh unrest.

Ahead of the election, Fonseka had alleged the government would intimidate voters and was preparing a coup if it lost. He had been accused in turn of working with a militia of army deserters to disrupt the ballot.

Inside Menik Farm, an internment camp for war-displaced Tamils in the north, people queued for



Ethnic Sri Lankan war displaced Tamils stand in line to cast their vote at a school in the Menik Farm area of Vavuniya district on Tuesday. Voting ended yesterday in Lanka's tense and bitterly contested post-war presidential election mainly between President Mahinda Rajapakse and ex-army chief Sarath Fonseka. The first results are expected to trickle out late on January 26 and a final outcome is anticipated around midday on January 27.

hours to cast their ballots.

About 5,000 men and women, some nursing infants, lined up under the hot sun in front of a school building in the sprawling complex of makeshift huts and tin-roofed buildings that housed nearly 300,000 at its height last year.

"I'm very thirsty and tired and we've had little to eat, but I'm here to vote. I'm voting for a new government," Vijaya Letchchami,

60, told AFP after waiting for four hours to have her say at the ballot box.

She, like the vast majority of Tamils that AFP spoke to in the highly militarised Tamil-dominated north, said she was voting for Fonseka, who she saw as better for ethnic minorities.

An estimated 80,000 people remain in camps, which are strictly restricted for the media.

About 200,000 were freed at the end of last year under pressure from the United Nations, which described conditions in them as "appalling."

Rajapakse cast his ballot in his southern home constituency of Mulkirigala and told reporters he was confident of securing a second term.

"We must be ready to face the challenges of reaching new heights after this vote," said the 64-year-old, who called the election only four years into his six-year term to seize on the victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said after polling closed that it had been "by and large" peaceful despite some incidents in the north.

India marks Republic Day amid alert

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

India has stepped up security in all its state capitals and major cities as the country holds its 60th Republic Day celebrations.

At least 15,000 police and soldiers have been deployed in New Delhi to secure the 8km route of the main parade along with anti-aircraft guns, snipers and mobile hit squads, officials said.

"We are not taking any chances," Rajan Bhagat, a police spokesman, said as officials effectively sealed off the central site of the annual event in the city.

Security was also tightened at all major government telecommunications and power installations, with frequent patrols and body checks for employees.

Checkpoints were set up to search vehicles on access roads to the capital ahead of the celebration, which marks the date when independent India's constitution came into effect.

Lee Myung-bak, the South Korean president, in India on a four-day state visit, is attending the New Delhi parade.

The display is a showcase of the Indian military's latest hardware, acquired as part of a massive modernisation drive costing tens of billions of dollars.

Rail stations, power and communications hubs and other key landmarks across the country have been placed under increased security for the holiday, while naval and coast guard forces have also been placed on alert.

In the financial capital, Mumbai, some 42,000 police have been placed at key locations across the city.

"There is no specific alert from intelligence agencies but we are on high alert anyway," D Sivanandan, the Mumbai Police Commissioner, told Reuters.

Security concerns have even seen federal troops deployed at the Taj Mahal memorial in Agra, the city's police chief said.

The security crackdown comes after Indian authorities put airports across the country on high alert last week, following western intelligence tip-offs that al-Qaeda-linked fighters planned to hijack an aeroplane.

Blasts rock Lanka before polls

AFP, Colombo

Several bombs exploded in Jaffna before Sri Lanka's crucial presidential vote, an independent election-monitoring group told AFP.

At least two bombs went off outside the home of a ruling party activist in the Jaffna peninsula but there were no reports of casualties, the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) said.

"We have a complaint that two bombs were thrown at the home of Subramaniam Sharma, an organiser for the (ruling) Sri Lanka Freedom Party, early this morning," spokesman DM Dissanayake said.

He said Sharma's front yard was damaged but there were no casualties.

A grenade explosion was reported from the Tamil region of Vavuniya, south of the Jaffna peninsula, but there were no casualties, the CMEV said.

15 militants killed in Waziristan

Bomb wounds 5 policemen

AFP, Peshawar/Quetta

Pakistani security forces have killed 15 militants in a gunfight in a remote tribal district near the Taliban strongholds of North and South Waziristan, the military said yesterday.

Meanwhile, at least five people including a district police chief were wounded in a bombing in Pakistan's southwest, troubled by Islamist and separatist unrest, officials said yesterday.

The remote-controlled bomb exploded in Jafferabad town, 400 kilometres (248 miles) southeast of Quetta, the capital of oil and gas-rich Baluchistan province, which borders Iran and Afghanistan.

"The bomb was planted in a motorbike and it went off as the vehicle of the district police chief passed by, injuring him and four other police officials, two of them seriously," top administration official Said Jamal said.

Local security officials confirmed the incident but said no one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack.

Regarding the gun battle in Waziristan, an official said the insurgents could have fled a military operation in South Waziristan, and were seeking to carve out new safe-havens in other areas of the semi-autonomous tribal belt that runs along the Afghan border.

The clash took place after militants attacked a security check post on Monday in the Tindo area of Kurram tribal district, more than 200 kilometres (125 miles) southwest of the regional capital Peshawar.

Pakistan ready to hold talks with Taliban

Says Zardari

ANI, Istanbul

In a bid to make truce with the Taliban extremists, Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has announced that the government is willing to hold talks with those extremists who lay down arms and agree to reconcile.

Interacting with media persons during a joint press conference with his Turkey and Afghan counterparts, Abdullah Gul and Abdul Hamid Karzai, on the sidelines of the fourth trilateral summit, Zardari talked about Pakistan's '3-D' policy.

"Dialogue, development and deterrence were the three pillars of Pakistan's 3-D policy," Zardari said.

When asked that whether Islamabad would enter into a dialogue with the extremists, who have been striking in the country at their will, he said raging 'war' against the militants would not resolve issues.

4 policemen killed at Afghan checkpoint

Suicide car bomber injures five Afghans

AP, AFP, Kandahar/Kabul

Gunmen killed four Afghan policemen in a predawn attack yesterday in southern Afghanistan, an official said.

The attack occurred about 2 am at a checkpoint near the Information and Cultural Affairs Ministry's directorate in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, an area expected to be a major focus of fighting with the influx of 37,000 additional US and Nato forces.

Daoud Ahmadi, a spokesman for the provincial governor, said it's not clear who killed the officers. He said the policemen apparently had visitors and an investigation was under way into whether the attack was political or personal.

In a separate development, a suicide bomber in a car laden with explosives struck near a foreign military base in Kabul on Tuesday, injuring at least five Afghan civilians, an interior ministry spokesman told AFP.

"There was a suicide car bomb explosion near Camp Phoenix. The target of the blast is not known yet. Five civilians have been injured so far," Zemarai Bashary said.

He was referring to a military base where US forces are based on the main road between Kabul and the eastern provinces.

Meanwhile, Afghan security forces have arrested five men over a spate of recent militant attacks, with one man accused of aiding a brazen gun and suicide attack on Kabul last week, officials said yesterday.

Taliban militants, some wearing suicide vests, attacked buildings across the heart of the capital on January 18, triggering fierce gun battles with security forces and killing five people and wounding nearly 80 others.

Top intelligence agency the National Directorate of Security (NDS) said Tuesday a 29-year-old man named only as Kamaludin had been arrested a day after the attacks.

Taliban militants frequently target Afghan security forces and officials to undermine the US-backed government.

Karzai hits back at US envoy's criticism

AFP, Istanbul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai yesterday hit back at the US ambassador to Afghanistan, who reportedly described him as an inadequate partner, saying he would not know to Washington.

"If partnership means submission to the American will, then, of course, it's not going to be the case," Karzai told reporters after a regional gathering in Istanbul.

"But if partnership means cooperation between two sovereign countries, one of course very poor and the other very rich... then we are partners," he said.

Karzai highlighted the hardships his country faced in combatting Islamist insurgents, saying "Afghanistan is on the frontline of the war on terror" and that the struggle had cost "massive casualties."

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